

How I Became a Socialist And Learned to Love It

By Ron Verzuh

The Green New Deal has already created a stir in Congress and in the minds of many Americans who have been quick to condemn it as a communist plot. After 10 years of living among them, I have learned that fear largely drives the collective consciousness of Americans: fear of skin color, immigrants, and communism. All three promise to hinder the deal's progress despite it offering the country's best chance of survival.

Thank goodness for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortes who had the courage and insight to introduce the deal. At 29, the already famous "AOC" has shocked some for its brazen call for socialist solutions to America's countless problems. For her attempt to solve those problems, the junior congresswoman from New York is under attack from Republicans at every level.

Unlike many Americans, AOC is dedicated to socialist solutions like Medicare for All, free college tuition, stabilizing Social Security, and most of all saving the planet. It seems like a no-brainer, but we seem to be living in an age of no brains.

Moving forward with the deal is no small challenge because it means shifting the American population to a more socialistic way of thinking. I understand what she and the Green New Dealers face. I also understand how difficult it is for Americans to see past their long-held and media-promoted distrust of anything they perceive as socialist. The Green New Dealers, then, are engaged in an uphill battle for American minds and many of them do not want to change.

With that hurdle in mind, and knowing that American capitalism has a built-in anti-socialist defense system, I began to ponder what an American socialism might look like. When I was recently asked why I thought the Green New Deal was a good idea, I called on some of my childhood experiences to explain why.

At first, I answered the question somewhat flippantly, saying that I had grown up in a socialist country. That wasn't quite true, but Canada has dabbled in left politics for decades and whatever its flaws it is far more advanced along socialist lines than anything I have seen in the United States. I then reviewed some more concrete reasons, starting with one of my earliest childhood memories.

I was five when I entered a local kindergarten. I was a January baby so had to wait a full year to enroll in Grade 1. Like most families we had only one car, so to get to the teacher's basement schoolroom each morning I needed to find a ride. Dad worked the graveyard shift at the main factory in the area and he mentioned to Mom that he might be able to arrange something.

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Long before I was born, the factory workers, including some of Dad's siblings had formed a cooperative transportation society. Many other families couldn't afford to use their cars for work transportation. Some moms worked part time and needed the vehicle. So, the best option was to band together to form the coop.

Let me add that I have suffered from childhood amnesia for most of my life. That's why it was odd to have this experience so ingrained in my memory. Perhaps it was because it was so vivid. I would wait for the old round-shouldered bus to rumble to a stop at the bottom of Milestone Road. Les, the driver, would open the door and a cloud of cigarette smoke would exhale from the dark interior. He would always offer a friendly greeting, as would some of the men who hadn't fallen asleep after their night shift. As the weeks and months passed, I became a welcomed fixture, the bus mascot, I suppose.

I didn't know it at the time but this was my first experience of socialism. I'm not sure the group recognized it as such, but they seemed impressed with the story. I then turned to a second experience that occurred a few years after I started school.

We lived in a rural area owing to cheap land outside a municipality. Many of Dad's workmates did the same, building small shacks as temporary family homes. Everyone wanted to erect permanent houses, but cost and time prevented them from doing so. Then they found a way to realize their dreams of owning their own homes: they decided that they would help each other build.

I was enlisted to learn how to run a cement mixture while other children hauled lumber or held footings in place. By the time, it was our family's turn, I was getting good at cement mixing. Soon a new community had blossomed out of forest and rock. I was about 10 at the time, not yet able to understand that workers building each others' homes was another part of socialism.

As that community flourished, another example of collective action occurred. Dad and the workers started a volunteer fire department. Every family had to donate time. Everyone one knew the benefits of protecting our cooperatively built homes from disaster.

A side benefit of having the fire department came during our cold, snowbound winters. It would be years yet before the community was big enough to build an indoor skating rink, so in the interim the volunteer dads used the fire equipment each week to flood an empty lot thus creating an outdoor rink.

I learned to play hockey on that little rink, staying late into the evening to improve my slap shot. The volunteers had also kindly strung lights so we could play after supper. In my teen years, hockey was of paramount importance, especially since our home team twice won the amateur world championships.

The local golf course was built the same cooperative way our house was built and our rink was flooded. Dad and many of his fellow workers were golfers or wannabes, but the only course in the region was reserved for factory big shots, local businessmen, and

politicians. No rule said my dad and his friends couldn't play on the course, but they didn't always feel welcome.

Then a socialistic idea struck them. Why don't we build our own golf course? And that's what they did. Those who could do so purchased \$100 debentures in the project as collateral for a bank loan. Unused land was found on the side of a mountain. Men, who worked as surveyors at the factory, mapped out the terrain. The factory's experts in using chemical fertilizers made sure the correct mix was administered. I even had a role helping to hack fairways out of the overgrowth of wild brush. I also learned to make sand greens; real ones were far too expensive at the time.

Later in life, I learned how my country fought for and won Medicare for all. I saw that educated policies from the left, such as the federal family allowance program, were positive influences in making my country a more caring and sharing place to live. I went to university on grants that a socialist government had provided.

Even today, my country provides me with a modest pension income through the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security system, both guaranteeing all Canadians some security in retirement. Again, socialism was subtly at work making Canada a better place.

But these important government social programs were only a final step in my becoming a socialist. It was the childhood experiences that stayed with me until I eventually realized that they were part of what shaped my political attitudes. They had helped make me a socialist.

Many Americans fear a socialist world and still believe the Cold War propaganda about the evils of socialism. They see the hammer and sickle whenever someone dares to suggest that America's problems might be resolved through some form of socialism. They fear that a Soviet-style bogeyman lurks behind such policies.

Think back to your own childhood. I suspect that you, too, will find examples of socialism that are worth resurrecting at a time when capitalism is failing most Americans and shows no sign of changing.

Clearly, the Green New Deal is up against a New Gilded Age of capitalist advancement. So it is difficult for many Americans to embrace the notion of socialism as a solution. But think what a truly American socialism might be like in a country of so much proven ability to innovate. Now that would really be making America great again.